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FLARR Pages #55: Teaching Curzio Malaparte's The Skin: Life is Not Always Beautiful

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"Teaching Curzio Malaparte's *The Skin: Life is not always Beautiful*" Victor Berberi, UMM

Anxiety over whether or not to teach literary works that may be deemed offensive is not limited to the perennial example of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This problem is felt at least as keenly by foreign language teachers, who act as ambassadors of cultures even less familiar to our students than the former British Empire. In deciding whether to assign Curzio Malaparte's novel *The Skin* (*La Pelle*, 1949) in a recent course on Italian civilization through literature and film, I was hesitant for a number of reasons. First, the novel, which paints a brutal picture of the degradation of life in Naples at the end of the Second World War, contains a great many graphic depictions of the violence and humiliation experienced by Italians during the Resistance and Liberation. Second, Malaparte at times characterizes the American role in Italy as an "occupation" (the manuscript's working title was *The Plague* until the publication of Camus's novel in 1947). This characterization immediately raises the specter of European anti-Americanism, something those of us who teach European languages often feel

compelled to qualify, if not entirely dispel. These issues are not unrelated: graphic representations of violence are somehow more palatable when we perceive them to be in the service of an ideology to which we subscribe. In the end, I found that including *The Skin* in my syllabus allowed me to situate the Resistance experience in a more complex framework. Moreover, supplementing our reading of the novel with a discussion of a more recent documentary, *Combat Film*, which addresses many of the same events, helped convey to students the enduring power of the Resistance as a foundational myth in the formation of the Italian nation. Perhaps most importantly, by considering the two works together, we were able to move beyond a reading of the images in either work to a broader discussion of the political uses of, and personal response to, images of war.

Susan Sontag, certainly one of our most significant theorists of the political power of the photographic image, argues in *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) that the photograph, while unable to "create a moral position," can "help build a nascent one," given "an appropriate context of feeling and attitude" (5). In her more recent *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and

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Giroux, 2003), Sontag revises these claims for the power of the image, suggesting instead that the ambiguity inherent in the dual nature of photography (as both artifact and record of a real event) allows for a perhaps unlimited range of moral or ethical responses.

Sontag's revision of her earlier position acknowledges the work of theorists like W. J. T. Mitchell, who takes up the problem of the relationship between words and images in his book *Picture Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994), among other works. Countering an age-old tradition spanning Lessing's early distinction between the competencies of poetry and painting and the more recent comparative method, Mitchell considers the place and use of images in our culture and sees images and texts as inseparable in critical practice. Mitchell points to "the inextricable weaving together of representation and discourse, the imbrication of visual and verbal experience" and the possibility that "the relation of the visible and the readable is (as Foucault thought) an infinite one" (83). What I am interested in here is not the specificity of the photographic image—in fact, contemporary arguments against the separation of visual and verbal disciplines suggest that we consider the relevance for literature of Sontag's claims—but rather the problem of establishing "an appropriate context of feeling and attitude" for the violent images of war we may happen to teach.

Whereas the 1994 documentary *Combat Film* consists of newly discovered American military footage of the Allied invasion of 1943 to 1945, Malaparte's *The Skin* describes an Italian liaison officer's experience of these

same events, from the progress of the Allies up the Italian peninsula, to the "people's trials" of captured Fascists by partisan fighters, to the grotesque spectacle of the dead bodies of Mussolini and other Fascist officials on display in Milan's Piazzale Loreto. Both works proved to be quite controversial. To a great extent, the controversy over *The Skin* (which rarely appears on either Italian or American syllabi) stems from the events of Malaparte's life as much as from provocative positions taken in the novel. While he remained a member of the fascist party until the fall of Mussolini in 1943, he was often critical of the regime and was in fact sent into internal exile after the publication in France of his *Technique of the Coup d'État* in 1931, in which he attacked both Hitler and Mussolini.

It is fairly easy to see how Malaparte's depiction of the period of 1943-45 as bloody civil war clashes with the history of the Resistance, according to which a minority of Italians fought courageously against the Nazi occupation and Fascist holdouts, and in which the identity of a number of post-war political groups is so strongly invested. One might argue that the difficulty individuals familiar with Italian history have with both works is largely a result of the challenge they pose to a consolatory reading of the events of the end of the war, in which the Resistance experience serves as guarantor of the legitimacy of the First Italian Republic. Indeed, since the end of the Second World War in Italy, construction of a sense of national identity, which involves the competing claims of various political groups and the contradictory historical narratives they would tell, can to a great ex-

than dismay. They may come to understand the perils of indifference to images of war and death. As Sontag reminds us, the problem with such images is not their ubiquity and the inevitable dulling of the viewer's senses, but the passivity that results from the lack of a political context. These texts offer great insight into the uncomfortable relationship we often have with images of war, particularly when these are bound up with our sense of self as informed by our understanding of the character and history of a nation. Taken together, *The Skin* and *Combat Film* remind us that these images often circulate in politicized contexts, and call us to consider the importance of the "context of feeling and attitude" we bring as viewers/readers. Finally, they ask that we resist viewing the death brought on by war through the lens of a predetermined, overly-rigid political context, such as that through which so many of us experience images of the current war in Iraq.